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Donald Moffat, 87, a Top Actor Who Thrived in Second Billings, Dies

By Robert D. McFadden

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Donald Moffat, the character actor who nailed Falstaff's paradoxes at the New York Shakespeare Festival, a grizzled Larry Slade in Eugene O'Neill's "The Iceman Cometh" on Broadway and a sinister president in the film "Clear and Present Danger," died on Thursday in Sleepy Hollow, N.Y. He was 87.

His daughter Lynn Moffat said the cause was complications of a recent stroke.

It might have surprised many Moffat fans to learn that this stage, screen and television actor was a naturalized, thoroughly Americanized Englishman who in the early 1950s had been a player with the Old Vic theater company, the London crucible of many of Britain's most ambitious performing arts.

Mr. Moffat (pronounced MAHF-at) had long ago lost all traces of his British accent. And in a career of nearly a half-century, he amassed virtually all of his remarkable 220 credits in the United States — roles in some 80 stage plays (he directed 10 more), about 70 Hollywood and television movies and at least 60 television productions, including series, mini-series and anthologies.

Moving to America as a 26-year-old actor was the realization of a dream for Mr. Moffat, his daughter Lynn recalled in a telephone interview.

"One reason he was anxious to leave England was the class system," she said. "He hated it. And he loved Americans.

"He met many American G.I.s in Totnes, in Devonshire, where he lived as a boy. It was in the American sector for the D-Day invasions. He also met many Americans after the war at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, where he studied, including his first wife, Anne Murray."

American critics called Mr. Moffat a consummate pro who could play any supporting role from Shakespeare, O'Neill, Ibsen, Beckett, Pinter or Shaw, as well as the lawyers, doctors, husbands and tough guys who are the stock in trade of movies and television — characters that make the stars shine and place the accomplishments of the ensemble above personal glory.



Mr. Moffat and Rosemary Harris in a 1965 Off Broadway production of "War and Peace."
Van Williams

Mr. Moffat was rarely accorded top billing. But when he played Falstaff, Shakespeare's bravest coward, wisest fool and most ignoble knight, in Joseph Papp's 1987 production of "Henry IV, Part 1" at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park, he was the indisputable star. Mainly a comic figure, Falstaff, a sidekick to Prince Hal, the future King Henry V, embodies a depth more common to major Shakespeare characters.

“He is the con artist extraordinaire and the liar par excellence,” Mr. Moffat told The New York Times before going on. “He has no income, but he lives fairly well, entirely by his wits. He gets trapped into being exposed, but he always finds his way out — so on to another level. There are all kinds of variations on that theme throughout the play.”

Reviewing the production for The Times, Mel Gussow hailed Mr. Moffat’s “rich, full portrait,” adding: “His Falstaff seems himself like a character actor: a man of many parts. He is a self-dramatizer, easily able to switch from barroom roisterer to battlefield campaigner (and coward), while always retaining a comic sense of equilibrium and an affectionate regard for Hal, who will, of course, in the subsequent play, abandon him.”

Mr. Moffat also appeared at the Delacorte in 1989 in the title role of Shakespeare’s “Titus Andronicus,” and in 1992 as Touchstone, the fool who outwits one and all, in “As You Like It.”

With his long face and bushy eyebrows, Mr. Moffat was a familiar figure to audiences, even to fans who could not quite remember his name. He was almost never out of work — especially in the 1970s and ’80s, his peak years, when he sometimes packed into his annual schedule four movies, several plays in New York or regional theaters and a half-dozen television programs.

Mr. Moffat won an Obie for his 1983 portrayal of an artist’s aging father in an Off Broadway production of Tina Howe’s “Painting Churches.” He received a Tony Award nomination for best actor in 1967 for performances in two plays presented by the APA-Phoenix Repertory Company: as Lamberto Laudisi in Pirandello’s “Right You Are (if You Think You Are)” and Hjalmar Ekdal, presiding over a household of lies, in Henrik Ibsen’s “The Wild Duck.”

He was also nominated for Drama Desk Awards as an abusive husband and father in Joanna McClellan Glass’s “Play Memory,” on Broadway in 1984, and as Larry Slade, the grubby fellow drinker of the saloon philosopher Hickey (Jason Robards Jr.) in a well-received 1985 Broadway revival of O’Neill’s “The Iceman Cometh.”

On television, Mr. Moffat appeared as Dr. Marcus Polk in the ABC soap opera “One Life to Live” (1968-69), as Rem the android in the CBS science-fiction series “Logan’s Run” (1977-78) and as the Rev. Lars Lundstrom in “The New Land,” the 1974 ABC drama series about Swedish immigrants. He was also seen in episodes of “Mannix,” “Ironside,” “Gunsmoke” and “The Defenders.”

Among Mr. Moffat’s better-known film roles were as Garry, the station commander, in John Carpenter’s “The Thing” (1982), about an extraterrestrial monster that terrorizes researchers in Antarctica; as Lyndon B. Johnson in Philip Kaufman’s “The Right Stuff” (1983), about America’s first astronauts; and as an arrogant corporate lawyer in Costa-Gavras’s “Music Box” (1989), about a Hungarian immigrant accused of having been a fascist war criminal.

From left, William Sadler as Mark Twain, Tom McGowan as the former Union Army officer Adam Badeau and Mr. Moffat as Ulysses S. Grant in the 2002 Off Broadway production of John Guare's "A Few Stout Individuals." It was one of Mr. Moffat's last performances. Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

His motion picture credits also included "Rachel, Rachel" (1968), "The Trial of the Catonsville Nine" (1972), "The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid" (1972), "Showdown" (1973), "Earthquake" (1974) and "Winter Kills" (1979).

Perhaps his most memorable film role was as the corrupt president — with perfect pitch to make the hero look good — in "Clear and Present Danger" (1994), the Harrison Ford vehicle based on the Tom Clancy novel. When the C.I.A. agent Jack Ryan (Mr. Ford) bursts into the Oval Office and threatens to expose a plot involving President Bennett (Mr. Moffat), outrage crackles across the desk.

The president: "How dare you come in here and lecture me!"

Ryan: "How dare *you*, sir."

The president: "How dare you come into this office and bark at me like some little junkyard dog? I am the president of the United States!"

Donald Moffat was born in Plymouth, England, on Dec. 26, 1930, the only child of Walter and Kathleen (Smith) Moffat. His parents ran a boardinghouse in Totnes, in western England. He attended the local King Edward VI School, performed national service with the Royal Artillery

from 1949 to 1951 and studied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London until 1954.

That year he married Anne Ellsperman, an actress known professionally as Anne Murray. The marriage ended in divorce. In 1970 he married the actress Gwen Arner. Mr. Moffat died in hospice care at Kendal on Hudson, a retirement community in Sleepy Hollow.

Besides his wife and his daughter Lynn, he is survived by another daughter, Catherine Railton, from his second marriage; two children from his first marriage, Kathleen, known as Wendy, and Gabriel Moffat; 10 grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren. Mr. Moffat also had a home in Hermosa Beach, Calif.

Mr. Moffat made his London debut at the Old Vic in 1954, playing the First Murderer in “Macbeth.” The next year he appeared there in several Shakespeare plays: as Sir Stephen Scroop in “Richard II,” as Earl of Douglas in “Henry IV, Part 1” and as the Earl of Warwick in “Henry IV, Part 2.” He made his film debut as an uncredited lookout aboard the H. M. S. Ajax in “The Pursuit of the Graf Spee” (1956).

Mr. Moffat moved to the United States in 1956, settling first in Oregon, his first wife’s home state. He worked as a bartender and lumberjack but soon resolved to return to acting and stay in America. He made his Broadway debut as two characters in “Under Milk Wood” (1957), the Dylan Thomas comedy about the inhabitants of a fictional Welsh village.

His working pace, still brisk in the 1990s, tapered off into retirement a few years later. One of his last appearances was as an aging, penniless former President Ulysses S. Grant in an Off Broadway production of John Guare’s “A Few Stout Individuals” (2002). Ben Brantley, reviewing it for The Times, said Mr. Moffat “registers a touching quality of imperiousness brought to its knees.”

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